

Time: *Everything is within walking distance if you have enough time.*—Steven Wright, American comedian, 1955 -

Opinion

Putting the past to work

It recently occurred to me, some 15 years after I first went to Waimea Falls Park for nighttime walks under the light of the full moon, that what attracted me in the first place—indeed, what has kept me returning over the years—is still there and possibly has grown stronger.

For one thing, to walk in Waimea Valley on the north shore of Oahu is to have one foot in the past and one foot in the present. Smells and sounds and visual landmarks mix together in a succulent stew, triggering thoughts of timelessness. For another thing, although the valley has known unhappiness in its time, there is a palatable sense of ‘hospitality of place’ that makes crossing the stream and entering the valley a sensual experience. While I doubt it’s unique to Hawaii, I’ve experienced it in Hawaiian locales more than in other places. Maybe there really is something that emanates from the site; maybe it’s just me. To enter this valley, day or night, is to enter a realm devoid of the anxiety-producing concerns of our times. At night, I feel these sensations heighten.

As I left the parking lot and walked under the cover of darkness, it rained slightly in the wonderful, soft way moisture can fill the air in Hawaii. I easily followed the road the one mile or so back to the waterfalls the valley is famous for—all the light I needed, and more, came from the moon, full and close. Amazingly, the light stopped close to the ground—I could have read a newspaper if I wanted to, but I could not see my feet. The road appeared as a surreal ribbon of blackness cutting through the trees which were clearly defined. The past, too, felt full and close and I felt it wrap around me as I bridged the stream on the modern concrete road. Water bubbled and gurgled in the night air, intent on reaching the sea. I felt as though the valley itself was bubbling with joy. I cannot think of anything that would have surprised me at that moment. House platforms and secretive small paths created an impression of walking through a populated area—a valley with a village in it, and people too, if I cared to stop and visit.

Walking slowly, my head swimming with the wonder of it all as I struggled to see in light blocked by tree branches, I noticed that off on either side of the road, the rocks and plants loomed menacingly. Their presence placed into proper perspective the comfortable feeling that came with being on the road. I speeded up past this

point, as I seem to remember doing on previous visits, slowing my pace only when the vista opened onto a grassy knoll luminous in the light of the moon.

The air was cool and heavily scented with hints of exotic plants and flowers that bloom only after the sun goes down. Whatever wind there was served wholly to rustle the leaves and move the smells along with me as I walked. It was a quiet walk—any other people who were out and about were so silent as to be invisible. I could have been anywhere, at any time in history. There were no cars, no traffic noise, no music, no indications, in fact, as to which year, decade or century I was in.



In the early 19th century, this valley supported a lively village teeming with the activities of a thousand people. Sandalwood grew profusely on the valley sides, holding the steep banks together. Through over-cutting for the China trade, soil erosion proved disastrous during heavy rains. Rocks fell, Hawaiian *hale* were destroyed. The valley became uninhabitable for the number of people who lived there. They moved on. Today, the valley is a park, an arboretum and botanical garden that is home to plants rather than people. It is in itself unique, harboring flora found few other places. But it is timelessness that calls me, and it calls in a voice that hardly falters.

Too quickly, I was at the falls. Sitting, miles from the city, looking up at the night sky with the moon behind a cloud, shooting stars became visible.

This happens to me, with minor variations, every time I go there. Year after year. In memory, I wonder if the suspension of time and space that I experienced was a dream or if it was reality. Yearning for the past, I think, carries with it such sadness that I prefer living in the present. However, whenever I enter this valley, the past becomes present. Whatever yearnings I feel diminish, replaced by the joy of the moment.

I don’t think this is uniquely my experience. My argument is not about whether or not it’s worthwhile, but whether the opportunity to find out should continue to exist, or slowly fade away in collective memories. I figure it’s up to us individually to perpetuate it, and I’ll be there again next month, under the light of the full moon. Like an interesting old aunt who thrives on company, I think Waimea Falls Park needs to be visited, and often, if it is to stay alive.



Just Thinking
by Alexander Kufel